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SUBJECT: FRENCH PRESIDENCY THINKING ON LEBANON AND SYRIA
POST-DAMASCUS SUMMIT

REF: PARIS 572

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The recent Arab summit in Damascus was a "failure" but the French still have no ideas about how to move the situation in Lebanon forward, according to French Presidency NEA adviser Boris Boillon. He told us April 1 that the status quo seems to suit everyone for different reasons, notwithstanding the ever-present risk that something could happen to cause a breakdown of the fragile stability that currently reigns. The fault primarily lies with Lebanon's irresponsible political class, Boillon contended, and France will focus on supporting the GOL led by PM Siniora and maintaining pressure on the "spoilers" (Syria and Iran), including via support for the Special Tribunal. Boillon complained that isolating Syria has proven impossible on the Arab or European levels. The presence of the French ambassador at the opening and closing ceremonies of the Arab summit had not been coordinated with the Elysee and may have been ill-advised but probably inevitable given France's de facto role as representative of the EU Presidency in Damascus. Boillon checked with his counterpart at the MFA to confirm his understanding that FM Kouchner is not planning to travel to Beirut in the near future. France is, however, interested in organizing a meeting on Lebanon on the margins of the upcoming Iraq neighbors conference in Kuwait. Boillon contended that France wants to move ahead with creating the Special Tribunal notwithstanding concerns about the potential loss of Chapter VII authorities currently available to the UNIIIC. France would appreciate consultations with us to discuss the way ahead on Lebanon. End summary

¶2. (C) The French Presidency's NEA adviser, Boris Boillon, on April 1 called the Arab summit in Damascus a "failure, even if the Syrians consider it a success." However, France has no clear ideas about how to move the situation in Lebanon forward, despite considerable "reflection" at the MFA and Elysee. The status quo, according to Boillon, endures because it satisfies everyone: Hizballah gets to keep its weapons, Aoun does not have to give up his presidential ambitions, and, within the majority, Siniora remains as prime minister while Hariri bides his time until he can take over. The only ones who are not happy are the Lebanese, but they are the victims of their irresponsible political class. Indeed, Boillon used this conversation to savage once more

Lebanon's politicians, all of whom acted like children. He declared that it was better to isolate and ignore them until they can act more like adults.

¶3. (C) We asked whether France considered the status quo stable. Boillon responded that one of France's main objectives is to maintain stability as long as the status quo persists, but the uncomfortable reality is that anything (most likely a bombing) could happen anytime. The French view is that at least Syria and Iran currently see the status quo as preferable. Iran in particular wants Lebanon to stay calm. Syria, meanwhile, is "in the eye of the hurricane" in terms of the international community but the status quo allows it to continue carrying out its business as usual in Lebanon while playing its usual double game in Iraq and the Arab/Israeli peace process. France, Boillon continued, sees the status quo as continuing indefinitely even though it would rather see things change in Lebanon for the better. He outlined French objectives as:

--Support for Siniora and the Lebanese government (essentially a continuation of current policy "somewhat by default"); and

--Maintaining pressure on the "spoilers," e.g., Syria and Iran via support for the Special Tribunal and diplomatic isolation.

¶4. (C) Boillon acknowledged that diplomatic isolation of Syria remains extremely problematic. Javier Solana from the EU did not attend, but it took a lot of pressure to prevent the president of the European Parliament from attending. Boillon complained that "even at the level of The Five" (France, the UK, Germany, Italy, and Spain), there was no consensus on Syria. France and the UK consistently squared off against the Spain and Italy, with the Germans split

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between Merkel's anti-Syrian proclivities and Steinmeier's desire to keep the channel open to Damascus. The Arabs offered no satisfaction either, Boillon lamented. He singled out the Algerian, Tunisian, UAE, and Qatari leaders for criticism over their decisions to attend the Damascus summit. They may have each had specific reasons, but they used the common denominator concern over the situation in Gaza to justify their presence. All of this was symptomatic, in Boillon's eyes, of the profound Arab "malady."

¶5. (C) We asked Boillon about the presence of the French ambassador in Damascus at the summit's opening and closing sessions. Although Boillon justified it in terms of France's function as the de facto representative of the EU Presidency in the Syrian capital (and the price France had to pay to keep the European Parliament's president from attending), he also indicated that neither the embassy nor the MFA had cleared the decision to attend with the Elysee. (Comment: Boillon muttered several times that the French ambassador's presence had been "stupid" or ill-advised, but he eventually stuck to justifying it in EU terms. He tried to make clear, in any case, that it implied no easing of France's tough political stance in terms of its disapproval of Syria's interference in Lebanon. End comment)

¶6. (C) With respect to the MFA's recent suggestion (reftel) that FM Kouchner might be considering a return to Beirut to help revive the intra-Lebanese dialogue, Boillon denied any such intention. He argued that, for one thing, Kouchner was too busy with other matters to devote time to such a trip. Boillon further maintained that Kouchner was himself suffering from "Lebanon fatigue" and disinclined to plunge back into the fray. The MFA and Elysee had held a working lunch the previous day that included discussion of Lebanon, and the idea never came up. To be sure, he phoned his counterpart at the MFA, Christophe Bigot, and put Bigot on speakerphone as the two talked. Bigot indeed confirmed that Kouchner was fresh out of ideas and had no intention to fly

back to Beirut in the near term. The only idea currently in play (as Boillon had mentioned separately) was holding a meeting on Lebanon on the margins of the upcoming Iraq neighbors conference in Kuwait, similar to what happened last year in Istanbul and at the Palestine donors conference.

¶7. (C) Regarding the UNIIIC and the Special Tribunal, Boillon claimed that France was not seeking to delay the Tribunal's formation. It had been a struggle, but the Gulf states had ultimately come up with the money necessary to get things rolling. He despaired of the other EU members contributing much more than they already had. Boillon said he understood and appreciated the arguments about the possible loss of UN Charter Chapter VII authority with the passage from UNIIIC to the Tribunal but believed France did not want to lose any further momentum in creating the one institution France thinks would bring real pressure on Syria.

¶8. (C) Comment: We are not surprised that the French remain fresh out of ideas, although the almost complete readiness to avoid any engagement is quite striking given Kouchner's previous hyper-activism. It is not clear how to account for the discrepancy between what the MFA and Elysee are saying about the UNIIIC/Special Tribunal. Our hunch is that the Elysee is not as focused on the technicalities but wants to move forward in the clear absence of many other meaningful levers over Syria. When we suggested this might be a good time for renewed Franco/U.S. consultations on Lebanon, Boillon quickly agreed.

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